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“The Meer Gift of Luck”: A Tale of Lottery Addiction in *Rambler* 181

SAMUEL JOHNSON'S *RAMBLER* 181, the story of one man's addiction to playing the lottery, is one of the many *Rambler* essays which resonate in our own time. Written in the voice of a businessman, it tells the story of his attempt to beat chance by applying reason, but he spirals ever deeper into the depths of addiction, losing his friends and ruining his fortune. It is a cautionary tale about the lust for wealth, a moralistic commentary on the heated imagination, and an example of reason gone awry in trying to beat a game of chance. Before looking more closely at *Rambler* 181, let me first give a brief history of lotteries in England to help set the scene for Johnson's essay.

State-run lotteries have been a part of English history for over 400 years. The first English lottery that we know of was drawn in 1569 under Queen Elizabeth, the profits to be applied toward the repair of harbours in England. There were several lotteries in the seventeenth century to finance schemes for bringing water to London, but lotteries continued infrequently until the eighteenth century when they became an annual event. There was at least one state-run lottery each year from 1709 to 1826, at which time they were outlawed.¹ Under Queen Anne proceeds were used to pay off government debts. Under the Georges, the profits were used for civic building projects (such as building “the first bridge over the Thames, in lieu of the Horseferry,” in 1740), financing

¹ John Samuel Ezell, *Fortune's Merry Wheel: The Lottery in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1960) 10.

wars, paying debts, and other government projects.² How much money did the state lotteries take in? In 1786 the state lottery received £688,750 and disbursed £500,000 in prizes, netting after expenses £176,000 for the government coffers (Ashton 91). Between 1793 and 1824, the annual yearly profit was £346,000 (Ezell 10).

In addition to state lotteries, there were private lotteries, called "Little Goes," which were "grossly fraudulent, the drawings being manipulated."³ The *Times* of July 22, 1795, noted that little goes were intended to exploit "the lower order of society" and were "calculated only for the meridian of those understandings who are unused to calculate and discriminate between right and wrong, and roguery and fair dealing," while the next month the paper reported that the term "*little goes* for the private lotteries is apt enough, for the poor devils who risk their property there have but little, and that little goes for nought" (Ashton 288, 290). Private lotteries were first outlawed in 1699 but many remained in operation, only to be outlawed again in 1718, and yet again in 1721. Despite their illegality, private lotteries were run on the sly, though occasionally there were some that were approved by the government. One such was the lottery of Sir Ashton Lever's collection of natural oddities, the Holophusikon, in 1784. He could no longer afford the rent and upkeep for a building to store and show his collection, so the pieces were dispersed via lottery (Ashton 105).

In outlawing private lotteries, the government was not seeking so much to protect the lower classes from being exploited as to eliminate the competition for gambling revenue. The state lottery was a form of voluntary taxation, as it is today, and had become "a regular method of raising money" (George 316). In the 1820s, as the state-run lottery was being voted out of business by Parliament, essayist Charles Lamb touched on this voluntary tax when he wrote that he had never "joined in the senseless clamour which condemned the only tax whereto we became voluntary contributors."⁴ Lamb had won a minor prize in the lottery in 1805.

² John Ashton, *A History of English Lotteries* (London: Leadenhall, 1893; rpt. Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1969) 61.

³ Dorothy George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Capricorn, 1965) 317.

⁴ John Strachan, "Man is a Gaming Animal": Lamb, Gambling and Thomas Bish's Last Lottery," *The Charles Lamb Bulletin* 109 (2000): 31.

There were lottery clubs which would meet to discuss numbers and pool their money to buy lottery tickets. And there were lottery players whose bad luck stories made news. The *Gentleman's Magazine* reported the story of a clerk who went mad after his winning ticket was stolen. There were reports of suicides; one clerk drowned himself because he had been using "his master's money, and chose this method of settling his accounts" (Ashton 89). In short, though the monies raised might have been put to good civic uses, in the end the state lotteries "were a cause of widespread ruin and misery" (George 316). In 1731, the *London Journal* noted the negative effects of "madding after *lotteries*, business is neglected, and poverty, vice, and misery spread among the people" (Strachan 24).

A generation earlier, Joseph Addison, in *Spectator* 191, constructed a fictional lottery player, George Gosling, who had spent some of his hoped-for winnings before the lottery was even drawn. Gosling explains in a letter to Mr. Spectator his method for choosing a lottery number, then closes with a P.S.: "Dear Spec, if I get the 12000 pound, I'll make thee a handsome present." Addison uses the rest of the essay to comment on people's tendency "to rely upon future prospects, and become really expensive while we are only rich in possibility . In short, it is this foolish sanguine temper, this depending upon contingent futurities, that occasions romantic generosity, chimerical grandeur, senseless ostentation, and generally ends in beggary and ruin."⁵ Only part of the essay is devoted to the lottery, but the example of Gosling is well taken. Spending what he does not have undermines his long-term happiness, increases his anxiety, and could lead to his ruin. Addison concludes his essay with a Benjamin Franklin-like exhortation to be frugal and not spend needlessly.

In *Rambler* 181, Samuel Johnson writes of a player similar to Gosling, but Johnson focuses more closely on the dangers of the lottery upon the individual psyche. Johnson's attention is on those people who are strongly affected by the lottery's potential for creating instant wealth. The essay is written in the first-person voice of a linen-draper who, after his apprenticeship, "proceeded with success proportionate to close application and untainted integrity

⁵ *The Spectator*, ed. Henry Morley, 3 vols. (London: George Routledge, 1891) 1:649-51.

.... For five years ... [I] advanced so fast in commercial reputation, that I was proverbially marked out as a model of young traders, and every one expected that a few years would make me an alderman."⁶ Valued for his hard work and dedication to his profession, his skills are noticed by others. With expectations for the linen-draper very high his prospects for success, both business and political, are very promising. This social aspect of the linen-draper's story must not be overlooked, because once he is bitten by the lottery bug, his addiction drives him away from society and deeper into solitude.

His life changes the day he buys a lottery ticket. On the day of the drawing, he says, "I discovered ... that the number next to mine had conferred the great prize" (i.e., the top prize) (5:188). Against the laws of reason, he is convinced that he missed winning only by a single number. Recalling how he dreamt up so many uses to which he could put the as yet unattained wealth, he acknowledges that "This dream of felicity, by degrees took possession of my imagination. The great delight of my solitary hours was to purchase an estate, and form plantations with money which once might have been mine, and I never met my friends but I spoiled all their merriment by perpetual complaints of my ill luck" (5:188). One lottery ticket and he is hooked. His reason and application, the years of apprenticeship and his own thriving business, are overpowered by the phantasms of wealth generated in his imagination. His close application and untainted integrity are dashed by this dream of instant wealth. Ironically, the dream is founded on failure—his ticket was a loser—but the false logic of having the number next to the winning number while overlooking the role that chance plays fuels his descent into gambling madness.

Eighteenth-century lotteries were not daily occurrences, as lotteries are in our own day. Waiting for the next draw, his imagination becomes "heated ... with the prospect of a prize" (5:188). The heated imagination, of course, is one of those Johnsonian perils that one needs to avoid, because it leads away from reason and into passionate decisions which lead to ruin, usually of a business or a romantic nature. Thomas M. Kavanagh, in his study of gam-

⁶ Samuel Johnson, *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson Vols. III-V: The Rambler*, ed. W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss (New Haven: Yale UP, 1969) 5:187.

bling and the eighteenth-century French novel, argues that gambling's "greatest evil" is the "unleashing of uncontrollable passions." "To gamble was to risk losing all self-control," Kavanagh explains, "to create a situation in which one literally did not know what one would do next Absorbed entirely within the impassioned present of the wager, the gambler lost all sense of past and future That state, measured against the calm ideal of a rationality shared by all, could only be a self-inflicted madness which men of reason must refuse, condemn, and extirpate from themselves and all around them."⁷ Kavanagh's argument applies to the situation of the linen-draper in Johnson's lottery tale. As his addiction deepens, his contact with reason erodes and his behaviour becomes erratic and unpredictable. His reason is razed by flames of passion fuelled by the desire to win.

Looking back, he sees himself as one who is at the mercy of outside forces: "Never did captive, heir, or lover feel so much vexation from the slow pace of time, as I suffered between the purchase of my ticket and the distribution of the prizes" (5:188). His comparisons are telling. Seeing himself as a captive may not have been unusual in an age of captivity narratives, but being addicted to the lottery lacks the romance and danger of the traditional captivity tale; besides, the lottery captive is a captive of his own desires, not of other persons. In comparing himself to an heir awaiting the death of a wealthy relative who obstinately insists on living, the linen-draper introduces a figure whom Johnson had earlier dramatized in *Rambler* 73. In that essay, Johnson's persona Cupidus complains of "the shackles of expectation" placed on him by his desire to gain his aunt's fortune (4:20). After receiving his fortune, Cupidus soon loses the joy that he thought wealth would bring. "Money has much less power," he writes, "than is ascribed to it by those that want it" and he is cursed by a mind "corrupted with an inveterate disease of wishing" (4:22). Such is the state of the linen-draper; wishing has corrupted his ability to reason beyond the next lottery or to enjoy the wealth he had formerly been earning from his own labour. Finally, the linen-draper likens himself to the lover, for whom time cannot move quickly enough until he sees the

⁷ Thomas M. Kavanagh, *Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance: The Novel and the Culture of Gambling in Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993) 61–62.

amorous object of his desire. The three types to which the linen-draper compares himself are romantic heroes, those who overcome adversity to attain their goals. But the linen-draper's suffering is trivial and trivialized in comparison: he simply wants his lottery ticket to be a winner. Thus, the noble aspect of the hero, whose attention is turned away from the self and toward his place in social relationships, is vitiated by the greedy desire for instant wealth, a turning inward toward self-satisfying desire.

Then one day he gets a winner: "At last the day came, my ticket appeared, and rewarded all my care and sagacity with a despicable prize of fifty pounds. My friends, who honestly rejoiced upon my success, were very coldly received; I hid myself a fortnight in the country, that my chagrine might fume away without observation, and then returning to my shop, began to listen after another lottery" (5:189). His statement is particularly telling, for he exposes unwittingly his blindness to chance; he speaks of care and sagacity, but in fact his method of selecting numbers is based on faulty reasoning. The despicable fifty pounds is nearly twice the amount that Johnson told Boswell a man could live on in London "without being contemptible."⁸ It is not an inconsiderable amount of money, but it falls far short of fulfilling the linen-draper's dream, and rather than cutting his losses and returning to his fruitful though slow labours in his shop, he resolves to seek another lottery.

In one of the funniest—and perhaps most pathetic—scenes in the entire *Rambler* series, the addicted linen draper hears of a new lottery and resolves "to take the prize by violence." He buys forty tickets and to help select the numbers most likely to win, he writes numbers on dice and "allotted five hours every day to the amusement of throwing them in a garret." Tracking the dice, he says, "one of my numbers had been turned up five times more than any of the rest in three hundred and thirty thousand throws" (5:189). Thrilled by his own ingenuity, he believes that "I had now wholly changed the cast of my behaviour and the conduct of my life" (5:189). This scene is saturated with irony. The blindness of the draper to his situation and its absurdity is risible because of the outrageous number of throws of the dice. The pun on "cast"—to throw dice just as much as to forsake the appearance of propriety

⁸ James Boswell, *The Life of Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. L.F. Powell, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934) 1:75.

and any possibility of a stable career—underscores the linen-dra- per's inability to stop what he is doing. In the end, the 330,000 throws are both funny and sad, the blackest of hyperbolic humour.

The linen-dra- per records his self-absorption as he reflects on the deterioration of his business and his personal life: "My thoughts were so engrossed by my tickets, that I scarcely heard or answered a question, but considered every customer as an intruder upon my meditations, whom I was in haste to dispatch.... My acquaintances by degrees began to fall away, but I perceived the decline of my business with little emotion, because whatever deficiency there might be in my gains I expected the next lottery to supply" (5:189–90). The increasing solitude of the lottery player is significant, because most gambling serves a social function by bringing people together in a mutual interest, oftentimes allowing them to interact as equals, "shar[ing] equal risks and hopes" in the pursuit of victory.⁹ But the lottery player plays alone; he has no partner, he does not sit at a table conversing with his fellow players. He chooses his numbers, buys his tickets, waits to find out the winners, and does all this at an emotional remove from other persons. He has turned away from the benefits of society, a choice of isolation that Johnson often attacked as leading to unreason and uncontrolled flights of imagination. After years of self-imposed exile, the Hermit in *Rasselas* notes ruefully that his "fancy riots in scenes of folly, and I lament that I have lost so much, and have gained so little."¹⁰ Like the Hermit, the linen-dra- per has loosed his fancy to riot in scenes that he has little chance of realizing.

The linen-dra- per's "desires yet remained unsatisfied" until he hears of a 5000-pound prize, at which he "caught fire at the cry" (5:190). Johnson's language here echoes Milton's in his characterization of Satan's wilfulness: the heated imagination, the mental vexation at the slow passage of time, the taking the prize by violence, the thoughts engrossed by numbers, the mind catching fire at the hope of success. Unlike Satan, however, the linen-dra- per is offered redemption. He reports how one day, while feeling the anguish of losing, he is visited by "Eumathes, a clergyman, whose

⁹ Tamara Alvarez-Detrell, "The Gaming Table as Social Equalizer," *Cabiers du Dix-Septieme: an Interdisciplinary Journal* 3.1 (1989): 23.

¹⁰ Samuel Johnson, *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, Vol. XVI: Rasselas and Other Tales*, ed. Gwin J. Kolb (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991) 83.

piety and learning gave him such an ascendant over me, that I could not refuse to open my heart" (5:191). Like the clergyman who "cures" Arabella at the end of *The Female Quixote* by Johnson's friend Charlotte Lennox, Eumathes wakes the linen-drafter from his illusions:

You have long wasted that time which, by a proper application, would have certainly, though moderately, encreased your fortune, in a laborious and anxious pursuit of a species of gain, which no labour or anxiety, nor art or expedient can secure or promote Rouse from this lazy dream of fortuitous riches, which, if obtained you could scarcely have enjoyed, because they could confer no consciousness of desert; return to rational and manly industry, and consider the meer gift of luck as below the care of a wise man. (5:191)

Thus ends this *Rambler*, but should we believe the linen-drafter is suddenly cured by the sermonizing of Eumathes? Eumathes utters the conventional wisdom of sense but why should we assume that all will be well now?

Like many of the *Ramblers*, the ending of number 181 is ambiguous. Though the essay opens with the linen-drafter's confession that he has "passed much of [his] life in disquiet and suspense" (5:187), the letter may be read as simply an acknowledgment of error, not a record of temptation and salvation. A more definitive closing would have the linen-drafter admit his problem and confirm that he had conquered his addiction. Yet all we have as the last word is the moralistic mini-sermon of the clergyman. We do not know what happens next; we are left waiting, perhaps for a future *Rambler* to return to the linen-drafter's story and conclude it. Many of the *Ramblers* end this way: not resolved but open ended, some storylines dropped while others taken up again, their speakers returning after several issues. Johnson uses this technique again at the end of *Rasselas*, the chapter entitled "The conclusion, in which nothing is concluded," in which the travelers resolve to return to Abyssinia after the rainy season ends, but there is no assurance that they will long honour their resolutions. So it is with the linen-drafter. Merely to record the clergyman's words of wisdom is

not to ensure that they are followed. The ambiguous ending contains a moral for all readers, but the linen-drafter's actions are what count, and we do not know what he does. Johnson's diaries are full of self-recriminations about aspects of his own behaviour that he was unable to change, such as his inability to rise early, to attend church regularly, to do more with his life, and so on. He is well aware of the type of psychological dilemma confronting the linen draper, and he knows of the suicides and ruined lives to which addiction and despair can lead. If he wanted us to believe the clergyman truly had the power to cure the linen draper, he would have made the ending more conclusive.

Johnson wants to leave us with a moral—that good sense and hard work, not the heated imagination searching for instant wealth, will lead to the good life—and so he cannot openly allow the possibility that the addict is past the point of recovery. Still, the possibility is there by implication. The linen-drafter has ruined his business, alienated his friends, and "lost by degrees my appetite and my rest" (5:191). Johnson can end the essay only with the hope of hope, not an act of actual recovery for the addict. He knows only too well the difficulty of changing bad habits, and rather than providing the story with a happy ending, he intimates a more realistic possibility, that the linen draper continues his pursuit of wealth by chance rather than by labour and so ends his life in misery.

I will close by citing one of the passages Johnson provides in the *Dictionary* to illustrate his definition of "lottery." Johnson's definition is morally neutral: "A game of chance; a sortilege; distribution of prizes by chance; a play in which lots are chosen." But the quoted passages he selects are telling, in particular the following, from Dryden's translations of Horace (*Odes* 3.29), that suitably describes the dilemma of the linen-drafter:

Fortune, that with malicious joy
Does man, her slave, oppress,
Still various and unconstant still,
Promotes, degrades, delights in strife,
And makes a lottery of life.

For Johnson, life is already a lottery fraught with difficulty and uncertainty. There would seem no reason to compound fortune's

inconstancy by pursuing dreams of instant wealth, but the enslavement of addiction admits no reason.